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World Chronicle

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POVERTY ERADICATION

James Gustave SPETH, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), highlights the causes of poverty and outlines what should be done to deal with this problem. Population growth, the marginalization of certain countries and peoples as well as a long history of slavery and colonialism are the main causes of poverty. We have the resources, the technology and the capacity to tackle poverty, but the political will is missing. Mr. Speth outlines five major components needed for the eradication of poverty: the advancement of women; the availability of employment and a sustainable livelihood; the sustainable management of the environment and resources; basic social services for all; and an environment which enables social development. Peace is also indispensable for the eradication of poverty.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. As we edge towards the 21st century, more and more people are sinking into poverty, in both developed and developing countries. Each day, more than 60,000 people join the ranks of the poor, most of them women and children in third world countries. Hundreds of millions of people are seriously malnourished; the majority of them survive on less than a dollar a day. What will happen to our societies if this trend continues unabated? And what can the international community do to alleviate the plight of the poor?

Our guest today heads the largest United Nations programme concerned with the issues of development. He is James Gustave Speth, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, or UNDP. Joining me to talk with Mr. Speth are Rob Watson of the BBC and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International.

Mr. Speth, welcome to World Chronicle.

SPETH: Thank you. I'm very glad to be here again.

LITTLEJOHNS: A great pleasure to have you, sir. This question of poverty and the eradication thereof—I guess poverty has been around, extreme poverty, ever since mankind happened, and probably even among the humanoids there may have been poverty of a kind. How do you suppose you can resolve this problem, eradicate poverty, in the next century or maybe the next couple of centuries?

SPETH: I genuinely believe that we can eradicate mass poverty, large-scale mass poverty of the type that we have today, within the lifetimes of today's children. This is a doable proposition. We have the resources, we have the technology, we have the capacities and the know-how to do this. I'm not sure that we have the will yet. And one of the things that I hope that this International Day for the Eradication of World Poverty, looking ahead to this being the Year for the Eradication of World Poverty, that we can launch at this time a campaign for eliminating mass poverty, much as our forefathers launched, 200 years ago, an international global campaign to eliminate slavery.

LITTLEJOHNS: So it's really, at this stage you're not unrealistic enough to think that you're going to be eradicating poverty as a result of this effort, but you are just sort of starting the ball rolling? Is that the idea?

SPETH: Well, I think there have been a number of countries, including many developing countries, which have made impressive gains in poverty reduction, and in one or two cases almost poverty eradication, despite the fact that they are low to middle income countries. And there are very impressive efforts underway now to launch this campaign.

But we have a long way to go, obviously. This is something that's going to take decades, it's going to take decades of concerted international effort. It'll take everything from very grass roots projects in poverty-stricken fishing villages in Senegal to global compacts involving the very richest countries coming forward with trade opportunities, opportunities to reduce the burden of international debt on the poorest countries, opportunities to make technology available. And so it won't be simple, and it won't be quick, but it is—this is the gravest human tragedy of our time, and it behooves us to treat it that way. It's a great sorrow on humanity, it's a great burden on the human spirit, and it is something that we can unite together, unite humanity in this crusade.

LITTLEJOHNS: What are you going to do, throw money at the problem? How are you going to tackle it?

SPETH: Well, I think one of the last things you do is simply throw money at the problem. That won't do anything other than cause a temporary spasm of consumption. No, I think we need what I would describe as a holistic, complete strategy, with five prongs as part of this. First, basic social services for all, for the poor. We're talking about the education of girls, and boys, but girls are certainly discriminated against in this process—70 per cent of the poor are women, not 50 per cent. But we need basic social services and health and education. Secondly, livelihoods. You can't come out of poverty unless there's a job opportunity, unless there's an opportunity to earn some money, to have a livelihood. This is critical. We have massive unemployment, a famine of jobs around the world today. Thirdly, regenerating the resource base. The resource base that the poor—the poor depend on the resource base very, very heavily, and in most developing countries that resource base, the environment on which they depend, is eroding quite rapidly today. Fourthly, advancement of women. We'll never address successfully the poverty problem unless we make a very special effort to advance the status of women, their access to credit, and other things. And lastly, the fifth dimension is what the World Summit on Social Development called the enabling environment. This is in some ways the most difficult of all, because it involves everything from international agreements on issues of debt management, on issues of trade access, allowing the developing countries to really benefit from globalization—it includes that as well as governance in the developing countries themselves. And we have now seen that a critical weakness in development cooperation in the past has been to focus so much on the economy and not enough on the polity, on the process of governing and strengthening the capacities of governments.

WATSON: I was curious, before we got into this issue of how you would go about eradicating poverty, to perhaps go back to basics. One of the things that you said recently, you wrote recently, was that the gap between rich and poor people has actually grown in

recent years, and that poverty keeps increasing. Why is the gap increasing? And why is there so much poverty? A very fundamental question.

SPETH: I think the gap has increased. Our studies show that the gap between the top 20 per cent of the people in the world in terms of income and the bottom 20 per cent, far from narrowing, over the last 30 years that gap has doubled. And also the indications are that poverty is growing about as fast as population. And we know that population is growing at its highest levels ever, in terms of numbers of people born per year. So this is a huge problem. Why does it happen? It happens because there are countries that are marginalized, there are people that are marginalized, there is history of neglect, there is history of oppression, there is history of colonialism, there is history of slavery, there is—even some of the efforts to help in the form of development cooperation since World War II and the founding of the UN, some of these efforts have been misguided. Too often development cooperation during the cold war was distorted by the effects of the cold war, by short term political and economic interests of fighting communism, and the Soviet Union had its own aid programme, seeking its own supporters around the world. And development assistance got caught up in this game of international politics. The UN has been largely free of that and I think has run one of the best development assistance operations of all during this period.

WATSON: As a journalist, you're always looking for someone to blame for these things, so from what you're saying, it's—poverty is partly a—I mean, there are people and Governments to blame, but it's also, you seem to be saying, just one of those things.

SPETH: Well, I don't know about being one of those things; I think there are a lot of root causes to poverty. I listed some. I listed some things which were in many ways external to the countries, things like colonialism and slavery and arbitrary demarcation of nation-States, and other things. But there have been serious shortcomings in the countries themselves. Misguided leadership—

LITTLEJOHNS: Corrupt leadership.

SPETH: Corrupt leadership, absolutely, and for decades in many cases a long-term experiment in highly-planned centralized economies, which, as we know now, has failed.

NGUYEN: Mr. Speth, in one of the five points you just mentioned, the advancement of women, I thought in the situation where you have the Islamic Taliban closing girls' schools and asking women to stay home, I thought the UN would raise more than just the mere statement protesting the fact, it would be the best time for the UN to raise hell, when you have this kind of situation.

SPETH: Well, as you know, the Secretary-General has issued a very strong statement on this matter, and we are now working as a UN to—and those of us who have

programmes in Afghanistan – to implement the Secretary-General's statement. The situation there remains very unclear, but it would be a great tragedy, because I think it would severely undermine the policies – policies which exclude women from real participation in development cooperation –

NGUYEN: What would you do in the future, if you have religious strictures that forbid women to work? Would the UN step in and say, "No, you cannot do that", or are you going to hedge because of the sensitivity of religious belief?

SPETH: Well, as you know, I think it would be – the general position that the United Nations takes in its development work is that we try to establish a presence, to make the best headway that we can in promoting issues. We operate today in a number of countries which have a variety of laws which discriminate against women. We operate in a number of places where some of the international donors, the bilateral donors, do not operate. Our general policy is to try to be helpful within the circumstances of the country. I don't want to comment specifically on Afghanistan because I don't know exactly how that situation will turn out. I think there's a role for the bilateral donors to take a tougher line on a host of issues – what they call conditionalities. But in the UN the philosophy has been more – don't make the people pay twice. So, for example, in Myanmar we are operating in rural areas now with programmes on leprosy, on water supply, on malaria and other issues, going directly to the people with development cooperation. And it's recognized as UN assistance, not as governmental assistance. And at the same time there are bilateral aid agencies which are not helping. Sometimes this works out very well. For example, in Vietnam a lot of cooperation, a lot of bilateral agencies and other development assistance entities were not there. UNDP was there. We stayed there. We worked very closely with the Vietnamese Government in effecting their economic transition. And now international investment is really beginning.

WATSON: So if I could just interrupt for a while – we have limited time – it seems, to go back, to return to your five-point plan, would you say it's fair to say that essentially the UN seems to have turned into a – it's like the policies that occurred in 19th century industrialized countries, at the beginning of this century, countries like Britain, where they said, you know, the general idea was don't concentrate the money in all the hands, what you need to do is Governments need to invest in education and in health. You're like, if you like, an early 20th century pioneer. Is that about the way you'd see it?

LITTLEJOHNS: Before you respond, Mr. Speth, this is **World Chronicle**, our guest is James Gustave Speth, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme.

WATSON: Well, do you see that there are similarities between that, the way industrialized countries moved to welfare states, if you like?

SPETH: Well, there have been a lot of studies which have shown that not just the current industrial countries but the thriving economies in Asia today are all countries which have invested in social equity, are all countries which have invested in human development, in education, in health for their people. We are so far, in most of the countries that we work in, from what we think of as a welfare state in the industrial world that the comparison is simply not there. We're talking about getting basic primary education, the very rudiments of basic health care, the basic rudiments of assistance to children, of immunization, of family planning services and reproductive health care, all of these things, to populations which don't have access to these things now. And—

WATSON: Actually, on that point, it always brings it to life if you think of specific examples: Let's say that I was a poor farmer in sub-Saharan Africa and I had a clever idea for making my life better and for that of my community. What should I do? Should I approach you? Should I go to—what would I do? How would I go about getting some help?

SPETH: Well, we certainly have programmes, very—the first thing that has to happen is that.... UNDP is working on this in 80 countries now, today, around the world. We'd have to have a governmental, a national commitment to attack this problem of absolute poverty, of the worst aspects of poverty. And these strategies should have each of these five components that I indicated. And on the question of—and they have to be decentralized. The strategies can't be simply something that are available in national capitals, they have to get down and they have to be made into operational realities for people in villages and towns. Now, if you have an idea—for how to upgrade your animal husbandry, to sell more meat or milk and to reach a larger market and go beyond simply the bare subsistence of your own family—one of the tools that we have learned that really works and where we are expanding our programme in UNDP is small-scale credit. And we are working with Governments now to establish small-scale credit programmes, micro-finance. We're also working to train entrepreneurs, to have special programmes that upgrade the skills of entrepreneurs, special programmes that look at the informal sector and see how the quality of a product produced in the informal sector can be improved and sold to a larger audience, a larger customer group. We are working through our capital development fund, which is a small-scale infrastructure programme, to invest in farm-to-market roads, which are absolutely critical. We want to begin to help in the electrification of villages around the world, not that we have big investment resources, but we can help get that process started. If you haven't got electricity, you have a lot of problems.

NGUYEN: Is there an area in the world where you are more successful? Let's say, are you more successful in Southeast Asia than Africa, for example? And, let's say, what are

the best conditions for you to succeed when you enter an area where you know poverty exists?

SPETH: Well, certainly one of the best conditions is peace. I have visited Liberia and Sierra Leone and other conflict-ridden countries in Africa, and where we have allowed—where the people in the country and the international community together have allowed the situation in the country to deteriorate into conflict, development and hope are set back decades. It will take decades to come out of this problem.

NGUYEN: So peace is the first condition to....

SPETH: Peace is the first condition. And we have had literally thousands of small conflicts around the world of different types which—they deter international investment, they lead to large expenditures in military rather than on people, and so this is critical, I believe. Secondly, you've got to build the conditions that will make foreign investment and the international business community more interested. And that means a certain commitment to the rule of law, to the law of commercial transactions, to enforcements against crime, to consumer protection, to product safety and other things that are essential. Also, the macroeconomic policies of a country are absolutely critical, and I think the World Bank and the IMF have done an important job in bringing the importance of issues of privatization, of structural adjustment into the picture. What has too often been lacking, however, is that these issues of adjustment have not been complemented by deep serious efforts to reach people with programmes of employment, of education, of health. There's been growth in too many countries without equity. And in many countries we have seen patterns of increasing growth, increasing income, and at the same time increasing joblessness, increasing poverty, increasing divisions between rich and poor.

WATSON: What about the greedy and selfish politicians that proliferate around the world? Do you need to get rid of some of them?

SPETH: Yes. We do. You know, one of the things that happens in a country which is desperately poor is that the State, the Government, becomes the primary source of well-being for people who are in it and who are closely associated with it. And control of the State therefore becomes too important, and therefore it is fought over. And, too, because we don't have a flourishing private sector and we don't have alternative opportunities. And when people are outside, they become desperate. And it's from this cauldron of poverty, hopelessness, control of all the things that can sustain a good life by the State on the one hand and people who are left out, desperately poor, jobless, who then become prey to unscrupulous politicians who can manipulate their frustrations, manipulate their fears, stir up conflicts, it's from this cauldron of poverty, of hopelessness, that tribal animosities can be

inflamed, that religious animosities can be inflamed. And that's one of the reasons we're seeing so many of these around the world today.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Speth, speaking of hopelessness, there are 25 million refugees in the world: Is there anything that could be done to alleviate the poverty in that area that's not being done?

SPETH: Well, of course the most important thing that can be done for the refugees is to get them home, to get them reintegrated back into their communities.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's a pretty tall order in most cases.

SPETH: We at UNDP believe that we have to be a very strong and effective development partner for the High Commissioner for Refugees and for those who are taking care of the internally displaced people within countries. And we have tried to strengthen our capacities at UNDP to be much more effective in community development and reintegrating of displaced peoples and returning populations.

I mentioned this five-point plan for eradicating poverty on a long-term basis. I want to stress that this is not just a concept in my mind or other people's minds. What we have done in the UN is to take this concept and to make it into a living, active programme. We have inter-agency groups that bring the specialized agencies, the World Bank, all the UN's funds and programmes together around these five major themes. And we're providing UN country teams with information, with ideas, with advocacy tools and back-up support and monitoring to support their progress on these five areas at the country level. So this idea, which we call the UN system conferences action plan, grew out of the UN conferences that we've had in recent years, and it shows that those conferences have not resulted in just a lot of talk and a lot of hot air, but in real action in the United Nations.

NGUYEN: Did the Social Summit in March of 1995 set out all these ideas, or—

SPETH: Well, it's the continuum of these UN conferences. Because we have—in this UN conferences action plan we have moved from the Earth Summit at Rio to the Population Summit at Cairo, to the Social Summit at Copenhagen, to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and to the Habitat Conference in Istanbul. And all of these—we looked at the conferences, we drew out the most important common themes, and we are now rallying the UN to implement and help Governments—

WATSON: That's interesting, because the UN is often perceived as a bunch of bureaucrats falling all over each other and getting in the way of doing any of the work. You're convinced that in this case the UNDP is actually not doing that, in the need for eradicating poverty?

SPETH: Well, it's not just UNDP, we have the whole system organized in this conference follow-up process, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But I think your premise is wrong too. The perception that the UN is–

WATSON: I'm glad you think it's wrong.

LITTLEJOHNS: On that note, I'm afraid we're out of time, Mr. Speth. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been James Gustave Speth, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. He was interviewed by Rob Watson of the BBC and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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